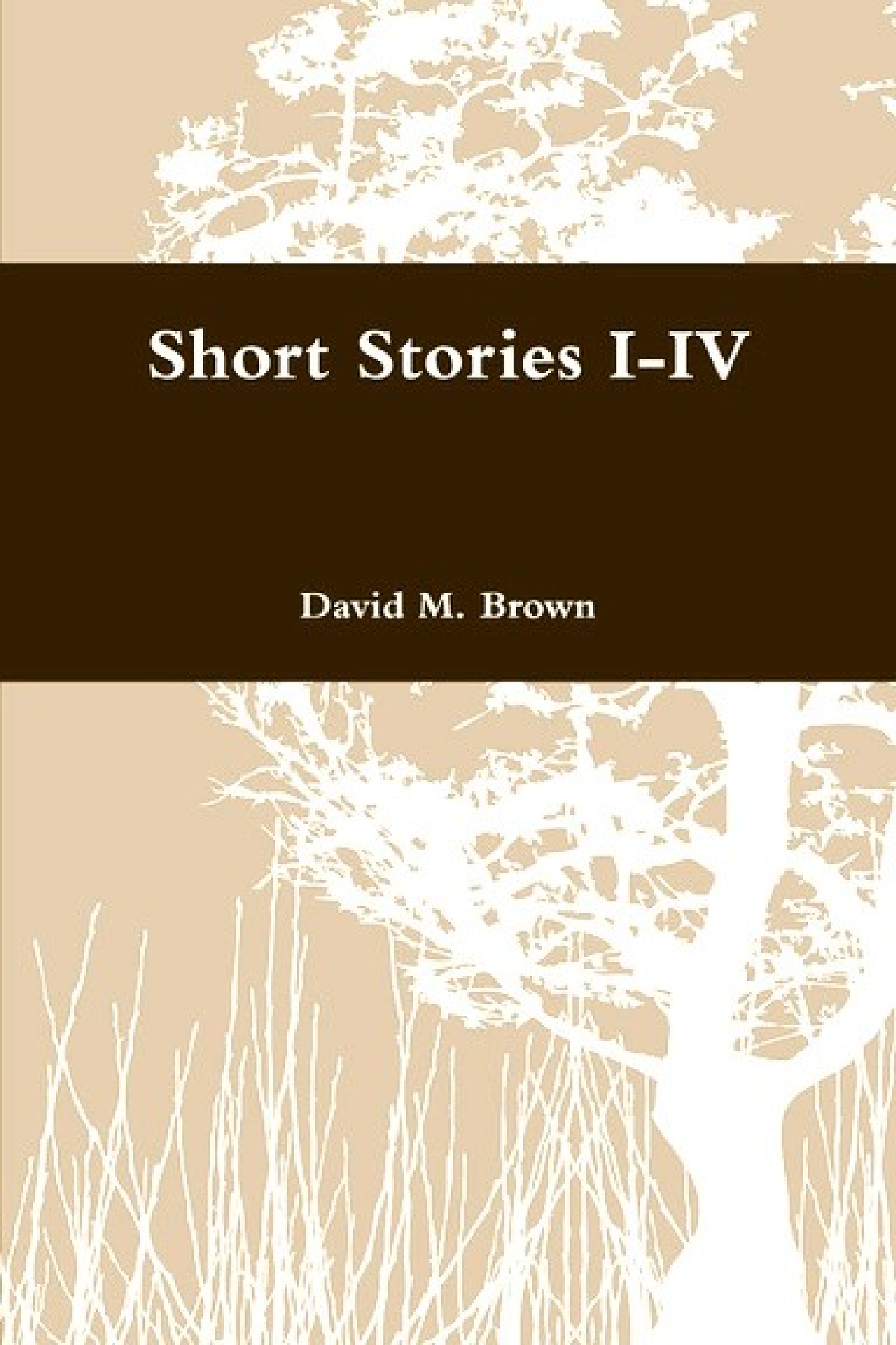

Short Stories I-IV

David M. Brown

Short Stories I-IV

DAVID M. BROWN

Copyright © 2011 David M. Brown

Published by David M. Brown/CreateSpace.com

All rights reserved.

ISBN 13: 978-1463577780

ISBN 10: 1463577788

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Brown was born in Barnsley, South Yorkshire, and first conceived the idea of the Elencheran Chronicles at college in 1999. He spent ten years compiling the history of Elenchera, resulting in 47,000+ years of events, 500+ maps, 2000+ pages, several short stories and many much-needed acquaintances with Jack Daniels. In between he managed to break away from his fictional world to write short stories.

David also has a blog, The World According to Dave, which features reviews, stories and dramatic tales of the horrors of owning cats.

David now lives in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, with his wife, Donna, and their six cats.

Short Stories I-IV is David's first short story collection. David has also authored one novel: Fezariu's Epiphany.

Find out more about David M. Brown and the Elencheran Chronicles at www.elenchera.com

For my no.1 fan and critic who just

happens to be my wife, Donna.

456

Deep in the Yorkshire moors, intentionally far from the nearest town or village, stood the home of Howard Barker. Now in the twilight days of his life, Howard remained on the very edge of solitude, his last link to civilization being the weekly visits of the housekeeper – Mrs Jones.

From outside the house looked derelict. The walls were irreparably cracked and on the verge of crumbling, while the foundations nervously held the structure together. The gates at the bottom of the drive were rusted and groaned their disapproval in the high winds coursing through the hills. West of the house was a roofless barn, the interior infested with rats and the ground now uneven and covered in murky puddles.

Howard Barker had lived the rich life but now in his final years the privilege of money offered little comfort. He was fat from wine and good food, his clothes had sunk into neglect and his lungs barely functioned with the daily abuse of nicotine and smoke they were offered. Alone in this isolation, Howard contemplated his life, the list of highs in his youth then the increasing lows of his maturity. It had been a life of two halves.

It was a cold October day when Howard learned the fragility of mortality. It had been raining that morning but in the afternoon the weak sun managed to break through the dark clouds overhead. It was enough of an incentive for Howard to sit outside in the garden, a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of whisky in tow. He had turned to whisky only recently – the years of drinking wine had built up his immunity and it took many bottles before he felt the slightest tingle of inebriation. With whisky it was different – just a few glasses numbed his senses and he could try and forget his nostalgia.

Howard longed for his youth. Ever since his marriage he felt life had never been the same. He had loved the chase of the village skirt, whether they were single or not; the best were always taken, it made him feel

more proud to have another man's woman, even for a single night. Howard had seldom been refused what he wanted. Drinking and women went hand in hand; he didn't need alcohol to build up his courage to approach a woman, he just loved a drink, but he wouldn't succumb to the bottle's stranglehold until he was certain of some company for the night. They were wonderful days. Who needed the excitement of the city when you could enjoy all the vices in the countryside?

When Howard stepped into his thirties he bowed to the obligation of marriage. He saw it not as a full-time commitment but simply as a means of keeping his wealth and home in the family. His wife, Diane, had loved his money but all she gave him in return for the make-up, dresses and shoes were two daughters - no sons, just daughters. Howard hated her for that. One son was all he asked for, yet after their second daughter was born, Diane lost all interest in sex and Howard knew the marriage would soon run its course. It lingered on for eight years, only collapsing into dust when Diane found Howard on the back seat of his car with her best friend. Howard didn't care then and he certainly didn't care now.

Howard's one monogamous love that he embraced in his twenties and remained faithful to into his sixties was fox-hunting. He felt like a king as he rode through the village and out into the woods. Did not the medieval kings hunt deer with their nobles? He adored the chase just as they had – the hungry hounds' lust for blood, their teeth dripping with saliva and their aching legs driving ever onward towards their next victim. It was sheer poetry – the ideal blood sport, but now it was over.

Tony Blair with his hopeful grins and uncertain hand gestures had brought Howard's first love to an end. In the space of a year Labour put paid to fox hunting and arthritis ended Howard's dreams of ignoring the new legislation. He retired to his home with his wealth and whisky, finding no solace in his existence anymore.

Today Howard was too old and frail to hunt and too weary and incapable to chase skirts the way he had in his youth. Even the housekeeper, Mrs Jones – the last link to the sumptuous world of

femininity – could not ignite the dying embers of his wilting lust. In her early sixties, she was the unwanted reminder to Howard of the increasing void between the happiness of his youth and the bitterness of his contemporary deterioration.

* * *

Mrs Jones had cleaned the house that morning but Howard had spoken little to her. He was lost in Churchill's account of the Second World War; the events of the conflict with the brave young soldiers gave rise to Howard's nostalgia once more. By midday he could read no more and, seeing the rain had stopped, wanted to relax in the garden. He was onto his second glass of whisky when he heard it.

Slicing through the whistling wind was a piercing howl. It seemed to be coming from the north, but Howard could see no silhouettes or anything on the surrounding hills. He grimaced as he stood, the arthritis in his knees was torturing his legs and his brittle bones made him bitter and in further need to be subdued by whisky. He grabbed a large branch propped against his chair – a makeshift walking stick – and made his way slowly down the garden path.

The grass was overgrown, the weeds were in the ascendancy, the bushes were in need of attention and the fish in the garden pond were all dead. Howard's dislike of people – many of the villagers had voted Labour – made him cautious and untrusting towards most, all to the detriment of his now neglected land.

Howard used his walking stick to hack the overhanging branches of trees and encroaching bushes aside. The howling on the moors grew more intense with his every step. Whatever was making that sound was close by. Howard passed beneath a stone archway leading to the bottom of his garden and immediately hugged himself. The breeze down here made him colder than he had ever been before. The top end of the garden was more enclosed by the trees but that couldn't explain this dramatic change in the temperature.

The howling sounded again, briefer this time, but followed quickly by an unwelcome growl. Must be a stray dog or something, Howard thought. He looked at his trembling, wrinkled hands and longed to be ten years younger. At least then he could have held a gun and sent this damn dog scurrying towards the hills. Nevertheless, he continued on, undeterred by this disturbance.

At the bottom of the garden, wrapped helplessly round a barbed wire fence, struggled the source of the howls. It was a fox; its once pristine coat was torn to shreds, its eyes stared at Howard with fear and the slightest glimmer of hope. At first, Howard felt a twinge of sympathy but this was soon replaced by revulsion. This fox reminded him of what was missing from his life. He had been happiest when on the hunt and here was a tormentor sent to laugh at his pitiful existence. It was too much for Howard. He stepped forward and raised his stick high, intending to bring it down on the fox's skull.

Before he could strike the fox the wind picked up and made Howard uncertain on his feet. He looked to the east and trembled at the cold and strength of the breeze. He had never felt anything like this before; he imagined this to be the equivalent of the gales on the tip of Everest. When he turned back to the barbed wire fence his heart nearly stopped. The fox was gone. Not only that, but the wire was simply rusted without a single drop of blood. It wasn't possible. How could the fox have freed itself? How could it have not left any trace of its blood when the fence was the only thing holding it together?

Howard turned uncertainly back to the house. He moved as quickly as his legs would allow but was stopped in his tracks by the sight of the dead fish floating on the surface of the murky garden pond. It wasn't their lifeless forms that surprised him – he'd forgotten he even had them – it was the way they were positioned. Grouped together, the fish remained still, beyond the movement of the currents and their bodies formed a number on the surface – 456. Howard squinted and read the number aloud to himself. 456. What did it mean?

Howard shook his head and made for the table where he retrieved his whisky and cigarettes. He would need them tonight – the whisky would provide inebriation and help him forget these strange events, the cigarettes would steady his nerves while he waited for the drink to take effect.

Inside the house, Howard locked the door and secured five separate chains. No one would be getting in tonight, he thought. Howard looked outside and found it was raining again. He was eager for another look at the garden so made his way to the kitchen. From a distance he thought he saw movement on the garden path – a dog or something dashed from one set of bushes to another. Howard thought his mind was playing the most perplexing of tricks so waited until he reached the window surmounting the sink before forming his own conclusion. He heard the eerie whistle of the wind against the pane and leaned over the sink until his nose was almost touching the glass. Raindrops slammed against the window, they ran from the heights, conjoining with their neighbours before running out of sight. Howard stood transfixed by their movement when, suddenly, from the darkness below something leapt at the glass and for a second he was eye to eye with glowing red pupils, fixed with purpose and intent. Howard toppled back, landing against the kitchen table and somehow keeping his balance.

Looking back to the window, Howard saw those eyes, bright and red, watching him, waiting for his next movement. He couldn't move. Those eyes held him, he was at their mercy and they could have decided his life or death with the slightest blink.

Howard's gaze was only turned from the window when one of the taps suddenly turned. Hot water came gushing out into the sink and steam rose towards the ceiling. As the window clouded and the watchful red eyes out in the rain became hidden by condensation, Howard's jaw dropped as discernible on the glass was a number – 456. It was the same number he had seen on the surface of the garden pond but he still didn't know its meaning. Howard turned off the nearby light and made frantically for the living room.

He relaxed in his armchair, poured himself a whisky and lit two cigarettes with his trembling hands. The first he finished within minutes, the second he savoured, taking his time to exhale the smoke, allowing the nicotine time to kick in and steady his nerves. The whisky felt bitter in his mouth and the first glass went down with a struggle. On the second his body embraced the warmth and his mind began to forget all the things he had seen thus far.

Once more relaxed, Howard felt ready to get drunk but he wasn't at the stage where he didn't notice the cold. Mrs Jones had brought logs for the fire, all he had to do was light them and he could enjoy the rest of the night. Howard struggled to his feet and knelt awkwardly before the fireplace. He tried to light one match but a small gust of wind came down the chimney and extinguished it.

Turning to the next match, Howard grinned, nursing his third cigarette between his teeth and, shielding the flame with his free hand, moved it towards the pile of logs. His eyes were fearful and his cigarette fell from his mouth when he saw, lurking in the shadows at the back of the fireplace, those same red eyes that had watched him through the kitchen window. He fell back as they came forward; logs were scattered across the carpet and soot fell in heaps from the body of the trespasser.

In the dim candlelight of the living room, Howard could see it clearly. The red eyes had faded in the surrounding candle flames but the mutilated head, the ravaged body and the filthy fur were still discernible as the remnants of a fox. It wasn't the same one Howard had seen struggling in the barbed wire but it still defied the laws of nature. Its body looked as if it had been ripped to shreds and fastened back together by a nervous seamstress.

The fox was dripping reddened saliva from its mouth, but its dirty and bloodied paws were stagnant and dry. It did not advance towards Howard, merely growled and only threatened to attack at any moment. Howard reached for his walking stick and tried to strike at the fox. It caught the stick between its teeth; its fangs split the timber in two as if it

had bitten through paper. It cast the splinters and torn wood aside and watched its prey closely.

Howard reached for the arm of his chair and managed to stand again. He held onto the walls and made his way slowly out of the living room. Out on the hall he heard a second growl coming from the kitchen. The fridge door was open, its contents lay scattered across the floor – vegetables, fruit, even healthy yoghurts that Mrs Jones had brought specially – they were all strewn far and wide. Guarding the kitchen like the flanking statues outside ancient Egyptian tombs were two more foxes, both with blazing red eyes and each with a body that seemed to be turned inside out. Like their counterpart in the living room they didn't move, they just watched.

Howard turned towards the front door and found another fox guarding that means of escape. To its left was an antique grandfather clock that had come to a halt. Its three hands pointed towards three distinct numbers – 456. What did any of this mean? Was this a dream?

Howard reached for the nearby handrail that led him upstairs. The four foxes that had secured the ground floor formed an orderly line at the base of the stairs. They didn't attempt the ascension and for a moment, Howard believed he was safe. He reached the top of the stairs and made for the bathroom.

Turning on the light, Howard looked in the mirror. His face was pale, he desperately needed to shave and his eyes were drowning in tears. He turned on one of the taps and drank two cupfuls of water. On the third he glanced to his left and dropped the glass, shaking as it smashed against the toilet seat. On the bathroom wall, written in blood was that number again – 456. Underneath in dripping letters was a simple question – Do you remember?

Howard's gaze went from the number and the question to the base of the bathtub. Staring up at him were two more foxes in the same state

as the others – neither should have been alive but somehow they moved and breathed with perfect ease.

Howard now had only one more place to go. He passed the top of the stairs, ignoring the quartet of foxes that were now climbing the steps and moved painfully slowly towards his bedroom. He reached the precipice of despair when he saw another pair of foxes sitting on the pillows of the double bed. The sheets were covered in blood as were the carpet and rugs. To the right of the bed was a large mirror with the number 456 smeared on the glass.

The growls and staring red eyes of the foxes were now as familiar as the furniture. It was the reflection in the mirror that now attracted Howard. The interior of the room was perfectly captured in the glass but the foxes were not visible. Howard looked at himself and was almost sick. He saw himself as a young man in a red jacket and white trousers, ready to go out on another hunt. Howard collapsed when the clothes in the reflection were stained with blood and the face of his young self appeared to have been attacked by a savage animal – cuts, scratches and gouges blemished his face.

Lying in a heap on the ground, Howard looked around him as, one by one, the foxes closed in. As their numbers increased the number 456 finally became significant. 456, he thought. That's how many fox hunts I have seen. As the foxes' eyes were level with his own, he welcomed the darkness that followed.

* * *

Howard opened his eyes and found he was no longer in his bedroom. Overhead he could see the weak sun breaking through the branches of deciduous trees. His sense of smell was invigorated; so many scents he could pick up in the air, but one distant aroma seemed unnatural to him.

Howard stood carefully and found he was in the middle of woodland. How had he got here? The foxes couldn't have just dragged him this far, so what was he doing here? The singing birds overhead provided no

answers; in fact the only thing that seemed remotely familiar was that strong wind – the wind of death – that went right through to his bones.

The sound of running water drew Howard to the west. He was still in a daze, unsure of anything save that his throat was dry and he sought any means to quench it right now. He soon came to a small river and drank greedily. When the surface settled his eyes grew wide. Where his reflection should have been was the image of a fox, not bloodied like the ones back at Howard's home, just a normal fox with a clean coat and young, innocent eyes.

Before Howard could accept what he had become he heard the unwelcome sound of horses' hooves galloping against the earth and the growls of bloodthirsty hounds that had picked up his scent. As he struggled with his new found instincts, Howard dashed north towards a steep set of hills hoping to throw the pursuers off his scent. Fatigue soon worked against him, the horses and hounds seemed incapable of losing their strength and perseverance. They kept on coming until they wore Howard down. As the hounds closed in for the kill Howard knew what it was to be a victim of the hunt. He knew of the sheer terror, of the body's need to defy its constraints and push on one last mile to safety, and finally the acceptance of this inevitable and cruel fate. Howard felt all of this then fell into darkness.

* * *

When Mrs Jones arrived at Howard's home the following week she found there was little, if any, work for her to do. The interior was simply spotless, no sign of the disturbances that had plagued Howard the week before. Throughout the house Mrs Jones searched, expecting to find Howard drinking or smoking bitterly in some dark corner but he was nowhere to be seen. She found work had been done in the garden, the autumn leaves had all been swept away and a group of fish were alive and well in the depths of the pond. Was this Howard's doing? She thought.

Mrs Jones made her way to the bottom of the garden and stopped in her tracks. There was a gap in the barbed wire fence and stood just in front was a young fox that watched her carefully. She knew foxes weren't too dangerous but that didn't stop her being afraid. Mrs Jones was even more taken aback when the fox seemed to give her an acknowledging nod before it turned for the gap in the fence and raced away.

Into the distance the fox ran, seeking solace away from the far-reaching hands of civilization. Mrs Jones waited until it had disappeared behind the surrounding hills. No one ever saw Howard Barker again.

Human Nature

Staring at the seemingly endless blue skies I see a myriad of birds flying high above the yard, working effortlessly to distant lands. They have the keys and privilege of the firmament, can see all around them yet are completely oblivious to the imbalance of nature just below.

In my lonely prison I sit and think of that word that isolates me from those outside these walls: freedom. What is freedom, for I don't know? How does it taste, feel or smell? Just how does it compare to this life?

The birds now vanish from sight and I am left with my thoughts and constraints. The sun is setting and the clouds are tinted with shades of pink and peach; Mother Nature has decorated the skies for us, as she does most evenings with her palette and brush, but on this day there is no respite.

The sun is just a prisoner like me; each day it is released from its confines to enrich a starving world, but then the hands of darkness escort it to its cage beyond the horizon and then it is the turn of the moon and stars to be set free. I once enjoyed the feel of the sun shining through the bars of my home, but now I know the truth, there is nothing to look forward to.

My home is but a small cage in one of two long rows lining the warden's path. I have three walls enshrouding my weakened body and half a dozen cold, rusty bars to cling to for support at night. In one corner is my own bowl; once perfectly round and green, but today it stands as a ragged, sharp testament to nights of chronic chewing and despair.

Beneath my body I can still feel the dampness of my urine and excrement; the warden has just passed by and that's why the floor is stained. There was a time when I tried to resist my nerves, but now I barely notice as my fur closest to the ground suddenly feels warm and the stench overwhelms the air in my prison. All desire to cleanse, to maintain

my rich fur and to free myself of parasites has long since subsided. This is what I have been reduced to, the way it has been for a long time.

Across the warden's path, beyond another row of captives, sits the defences of this fortress. They swallow each victim whole and digest them slowly, marvelling in every outburst of anguish. We saw the warden invite his kind to the prison yard to erect the fortress; they brought violated and molested trees, reshaping them into what the warden calls a 'fence' and to this they added dull foliage, sharper than the prickliest leaves and named 'barbed wire'. How strange the trees now appear, standing once more to keep us locked away, whereas before they were our sanctuary.

Outside the fence stand a dozen guard dogs; one of these was once an innocent like me, pure of heart, seldom subjected to hate. We called him Victor, a name of great bearing on his character; he was our inspiration, never would he shy from a challenge and always he could lift the lowest of spirits. Today, he is unrecognisable; hours being beaten by the warden have turned Victor into mankind's plaything. Now he has no heart or soul, only a desire and hunger for those of us that dare to escape from this fortress. In a matter of weeks, the warden's hands have taken away a friend, and moulded and contorted him beyond all comprehension. The predator returned to us another enemy, but this came as no surprise; we know the power of those filthy hands.

You can never be sure when he will appear, but it's usually around noon. First you hear the footsteps signalling the warden's approach, the dry soil is crushed beneath his feet at every step; another aspect of nature simply wilts into dust in his presence. As he closes on our cages, we listen for the sound of his club being removed from his belt and then the rattling of rusty bars as our host taunts us. He passes by my cage, knocking rust clean off the central bars, and then he crouches in front of me, his grey eyes focussed on mine as he licks his lips and chooses his next victim. His bulky arms are covered in tattoos; the images embedded in his skin are of skulls and snakes, some hidden like safe animals in the forest that is the thick hair on his arms. Those strong hands are always damp; their stench is of blood and sweat, while the faint scent of his last victim is often

present. He handles animals like a curious child learning of the limits in life; we don't know what to expect when we are taken from our homes. He always has what looks like a small branch between his teeth; smoke rises from one end, which is badly burnt, and often we hear the name 'cigar' when our host converses with his kind. If Man is the embodiment of all the world's worst traits, then the warden is the manifestation of the cruellest evil; a dark adversary, bereft of compassion and sorrow, giving way only to unmerciful hate.

There was once a young girl that came to our fortress. The warden would show us all to her and she would giggle with delight at our blank expressions as we waited for our next punishment. She brought the brightest light of comfort to the shadows of our world of suffering. The warden would never show the girl how he treated us; instead he would speak of his empathy and how he had rescued us from cruel owners. However, it wasn't the warden's leniency that we treasured; it was the girl's hands. I can still remember the first time she held me; one hand against my back, the other she sat me on. She held me close that first time and I did not pick up the scent of blood or sweat that overwhelmed the warden. The girl's smell was reminiscent of flowerbeds and forests; her hands felt warm and consoling against my fur and for a brief moment all my anxieties were like the warden's hand that pinned me down during experiments, but had now been lifted.

I felt the warden stroke my fur and noticed his surreptitious smile as I flinched. There was an innocent glow in his eyes but I could make out the dark cloisters in the corners of those pupils, a relentless hate waiting to claw itself to the surface.

As the girl rubbed her chin against the top of my head, I listened to her and the warden. She was concerned about the wounds to both my legs and my left eye. The warden – her father and hero – told of how he had single-handedly rescued me from my previous owners who had left me scarred. The warden's daughter sparkled with admiration and had never loved him more than in that moment.

* * *

As I was placed back in my cage I felt sad once again as I inhaled the air of lies and deceit. Little did the girl know but the warden's boots inflicted those wounds on my legs. As for my eye, that was the work of the warden's friends, the ones that have white coats like the polar bear and insist on using us for experiments.

I was but six months old when the warden came to my home and before he had reached my cage, the floor was steaming and wet. I felt insecure in those oppressive hands, the grip was firm and the nails dug into my sides like those of an eagle securing its prey. When I reached the far side of the fortress I was taken into a large cage and laid on a hard surface, the remnants of a tree long since killed. As the warden held me down, the men with the white coats came; one of them was writing something, the other held a small object with his finger resting on its head. Its body was shaped like that of a tree devoid of branches, while its tiny head spat a large spray of venom on my fur. These men called it 'deodorant'. It felt unnatural against my fur; I almost choked when inhaling it for the first time, but the warden simply nodded his approval. The funny thing is something that smells so unnatural is designed to make Man more attractive.

I felt the warden loosen his grip before he asked for another experiment; this time on my eyes. I couldn't tell you what those men used on me. One of them held out a long clear stick above my head and three drops struck me in my left eye. As I watched I thought back to the leaves of the trees in autumn when the raindrops land on their surface and drip one by one off the edge to the ground below. These drops looked no different to rain, but they felt worse than anything I have ever encountered. At first, my vision was a little blurred but then came the throbbing in my eye before it intensified. I cannot remember anything beyond that pain. I awoke the next day to find my right eye was all that remained; the other was scarred and ruined.

The warden's daughter, though oblivious to her father's true demeanour, continued to visit for the next year. One day we never saw her again. I remember that day was Wednesday and always she would arrive with our host, but not today. Instead, the warden was more ruthless than he had been in many months. That night rumours flowed from cage to cage, whispers of a single word that defined the warden's growing hostility - 'divorce' - but that means nothing to me.

* * *

We have passed the early days of November and in particular the fifth day is the warden's favourite. Often he invites his friends to this impenetrable fortress to bear witness to the huge pile of junk erected in the centre of the yard. Carpets, wood, furniture and boxes are set alight in the early evening and we that observe shriek in terror at the magnitude of the flames. Ours is a fear of fire, but also of the next time that the warden piles up all his junk from home. As he fans the flames under the night sky, no one asks what is in the hundreds of boxes placed on the fire, but we know. The failed experiments reside in those boxes, some dead, others alive, but all destined to be taken prematurely from this world. The fifth day of November is the worst night for us all, sitting helpless watching the flames scorch carrion and living flesh; their scent released through smoke while their ashes stand as the testament of our friends' bravery and martyrdom.

As I live through all of this I find myself uttering the same questions yet no one ever has the answers. 'When you drag this ephemeral world closer to extinction is it because you'd rather see us dead than lose control? When you leave us entangled in malevolent fishing nets is it because you envy our underwater freedom beneath your feet? When you steal beautiful fur to make monstrous coats is it because you'll never be content with the way you look? When your industries pollute and ravage our homes is it because you simply don't understand the world as we do? When pandemoniac machines destroy serene rainforests is it because you envy Mother Nature's handiwork? When hunters shoot down birds from a cowardly distance is it because you won't accept that we rule the skies

and never crash? When you run us into the ground with bloodthirsty hounds is it because you're afraid of losing in a fair fight? When you experiment on us for the latest fashions is it because you're afraid to look in the mirror without a mask? When technology kills everything in its path is it because you've lost your way and cannot get back to our kingdom? And only when the last of us are gone and nothing is left will you then realise that this was our world as much as yours, or is this simply human nature?'

Susan

It's five minutes until midnight and she will soon be home. Susan. Through the bedroom window I can see the full moon in the ascendancy; the glowing beacon in the night sky is supported by countless glittering stars that lend their exquisite splendour to the endless cosmos. This is the perfect setting for what I have planned. I'm going to propose to Susan. It's destiny. We've been together for three years. The time is right. This is the moment to make this commitment. I just have to wait for her to come home. Susan's out with friends tonight but she should be home by midnight. It's the time we agreed. She doesn't go to the clubs anymore. She knows I hate that.

Sitting alone, watching the painfully slow hands on the bedside clock, I think back over the last three years with Susan. We have stood hand in hand through joy, adversity, hope and sadness, always emerging stronger and more devoted to each other than before. There have been tough times, of course, but what couple doesn't have them?

Since I agreed to let Susan have one night out a week with her friends we've simply thrived. The excitement of our first few months together was re-ignited and the arguments, cuts and bruises of old were confined to the past. I'm not that same person. I've released some of Susan's bonds, have allowed her to breathe and we're stronger for my concessions.

We don't go out together anymore. I hated the way Susan would always approach the bar, fully aware of the leering stares around her from the young and the old. She absorbed the attention, revelled in the adoration of all the prying eyes, continually taunting me while immersing herself in the transparency of her sensuous femininity. Susan has a hold over me but what I sacrifice of myself inside I am compensated with by her boundless devotion to me.

When Susan and I are alone she's a different person. I recall long drives in the countryside, drinking wine while overlooking golden fields, or laying together beneath the trees at night and trying to perceive the stars through the overhanging canopies. I can vividly recall the tears of joy glistening in Susan's eyes like the moonlight basking on a mountain lake, the summer breeze racing through her hair, or the glitter of the lip gloss that somehow enhanced her already faultless visage. She is mine and mine alone. No one can keep us apart.

* * *

It's now after midnight and Susan isn't home yet. Where could she be? Why is she late? Has she been delayed getting a taxi? Has she been lured to one of the clubs by her friends? It wouldn't be the first time. They've always been a bad influence on her. I don't get on with any of them. They think of me as paranoid and domineering, yet they're the ones keeping her from me.

I recall one night having to head into town myself to find Susan. There she was in one of the night clubs, her appearance in complete contrast to what I'm used to. Her face, which only ever needed the lightest application of make-up, was heavy set with pronounced lipstick and glittering eyeliner that augmented the lustre of her striking eyes. It drew too much attention to her and I hated it. The jeans I'd seen Susan leave in were now replaced by a short skirt, her long bare legs dominated the dance floor and her every movement and step drew stares that were fixed and filled with insatiable desire.

I remember we argued that night outside the club. I tried to remind Susan of how proper women should dress but she was beyond my reasoning. Drunk on wine, vodka and cocktails, Susan belied my ideals of her – timid and monogamous. She told me that she was breaking up with me. 'It's been going nowhere for months,' Susan said. She was tired of my insecurities and jealous mind. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Why was she trying to ruin us?

We were soon back in the club. The music seemed louder and Susan was dancing again. First, she danced alone then worked her way between different men, encouraging them to look in my direction and grin with gratitude for what they were about to receive. I held onto the bar, seething, but she carried on anyway. Why couldn't Susan understand how this made me feel?

I played the dutiful boyfriend and saw Susan home safely. I didn't care how many men she'd been with. I still wanted her despite the conflicting scents that were a painful testament to her betrayal. Back at the house, Susan was feeling the first glimmers of sobriety but it didn't diminish her newly found resolve, it only served to enhance it. Susan continued to speak of our relationship coming to an end but I knew it was just the drink talking.

When Susan persisted with her ridiculous ideas and tried to leave I pushed her. I watched as she hit her head and soon lay motionless. Did I push her or did she just fall? I can't remember clearly. I only recall Susan lying on the kitchen floor. There was no pulse. Had I killed her? She'd fallen and hit her head but it was an accident, I was sure of it. I could never hurt Susan. Those visits to the hospital months before were different. She'd provoked me into giving her those broken bones. I hadn't lashed out for a long time. I was beyond such jealous rage now.

* * *

It's half past midnight when I hear the distant sound of a door opening then slamming shut. Susan's home at last! Where's she been? What's she been doing? Who's she been with? I have to prepare myself to confront her yet again. I thought we were past all these days of deceit and hurt. Her footsteps are treading lightly on the stairs. What should I do? I see her shadow beneath the door come to a halt. Her form is one of caution; she's listening, wondering if I'm still awake and waiting for her. I'm always waiting for Susan. What should I say to her? The doorknob turns and the familiar creaking fills the room as it slowly opens.

I immediately recoil and shield my eyes as the open door allows bright light to fill the room. The darkness around me fades quickly, the shadows retreat into oblivion and my surroundings completely change. All colour and life leaves the room and is replaced by white walls and a plain matching bed. There are no pictures on the walls and the window is no longer in sight. I'm in a room without windows. What is this? What is going on?

I turn to the door and see a young woman briefly hesitate before entering my room. She's carrying a small tray with some pills and a glass of water. I ask about Susan but the woman just stares at me blankly. She tells me I'm not supposed to talk about Susan but I don't understand why. I wonder if something's happened to her. It's at this point I notice the young woman is a nurse. Susan must be in hospital. It looks like I have lost my temper. I'll have to make sure it doesn't happen again. I can't afford to lose Susan.

I'm now feeling nauseous but the nurse gives me some pills and assures me the sickness will pass. I swallow the pills and drink the whole glass of water with some trepidation. I don't know what I'm taking but this whole process seems routine and strangely familiar somehow, though I can't recall why.

The nurse leaves with the empty tray and glass. I watch as she closes the door behind her and leaves me alone in the room without windows. My nausea now dominates my thoughts and I hug my stomach as I wait for the pills to have an effect. It takes some time but soon I'm feeling so much better.

I look through the nearby window and watch the moon and stars. What time is it now? It's almost midnight. I must be patient because all is well. Susan will be here soon and I can hardly wait.

The Jarls of the Ocean

The peaks of the distant mountains protruded from the dense mist, overlooking the fjord like archers manning castle walls. The mist crept down the mountainside as if it were a waterfall, descending slowly to the muddy banks below where a group of ships lay anchored in the water, their hulls fastened close together to amass a large fleet.

Boarding had already begun and as I looked down on the crowd by the waterside, an overwhelming sense of fear and uncertainty laid siege to my heart. Could this finally be it? Were three years spent lying dormant in this empty land finally going to end? My village had witnessed great portents only the night before; some spoke of dragons circling the skies, their flames lighting the frozen plains below, their eyes raging and red beneath their dark, moist lids. Change was in the air. We could feel it.

We had watched men depart from our land, sailing into the stormy seas and far beyond the increasing boundaries of contemplation. Those that returned did so with riches and enchanting tales of other worlds. The whispers in the snow-covered valleys of home spoke of lands filled with gold in the west; rumours of rich towers erected along the coastline were ripe, each was said to be filled with treasure, but the most captivating stories spoke of something much more extravagant.

Further west than men can seldom recall is said to be a land of eternal sun; bereft of the frozen mountains, icy rivers and snowy plains of home, and in this world there lived dark creatures that even scholars have failed to capture through the snare of words. My ancestors once sought a home in this world, but the savages were like nothing they had ever faced, and now this land is spoken of only through trembling lips around the campfire on solemn nights.

Now, I stood on the verge of joining such legends. My family were with me as I made those final steps from land to sea. The prows of the ships were visible in the lurking mist above the mountains, fearsome

heads of dragons stared beyond the fjord and out into the open sea. Theirs was the desire to be away from this place but my soul was drowning in sadness as I prepared to disappear beneath the deck.

Men waved to their families with thoughts already of returning before they took up position among the oars. When it came to my turn, I found my eyes distracted by an oak tree close to where my wife and two children were standing. On its boughs rested two ravens, their breaths forming like smoke in the cold air. They spoke to each other, maybe whispering sweet nothings or daring to speculate on the fate of us all. At the time I thought little of their presence; I simply turned to my family and reluctantly waved for the last time.

They understand, I thought, leaving the deck behind. We need a home away from here. A jarl of darkness grows powerful in the east, his hand reaches across the hills bringing with it suffering and ruin, but in the west rests a world of hope. Warriors such as I live for these opportunities to prove our worth. What else is there?

* * *

We were six days at sea when I was called to work the tiller. Only moments after beginning my duty the gathering clouds above began to spew rain onto the rising sea. The rumble of thunder seemed distant but then grew to a tremendous roar. As I felt the tiller become damp in my palms, I watched the skies trying to understand these new portents.

Suddenly the storm clouds began to disperse and Thor, the god of thunder, emerged from behind the gathering above. He appeared as the myths divulged; his hair and beard were long and red, drenched in the rain and trailing behind him in the breeze as he guided two raging goats across the skies. Thor stood in a chariot of gold; one hand gripped the reins of each goat drawing him through the storm, the other held his mighty hammer, Mjollnir, aloft. Thor struck the clouds on either side of his glistening chariot with devastating pounds and, with every blow of his hammer, there erupted sheets of lightning, their incandescent glow brief

but powerful. Then, just as he had appeared, Thor was lost in the west, the wheels of his chariot trailing sparks of lightning.

Having witnessed such a spectacle, I reached for my necklace and held the amulet to my face. It was a wooden carving of Thor's hammer and as I pressed its damp body to my lips, I closed my eyes and thought of home. The gods were with us but could Thor's presence also have been a warning about the west? I couldn't be sure. All I knew was that I had to keep the ship on its western course.

We were at sea for what seemed months, but could only have been a few weeks. The atmosphere on every ship was like nothing I had ever felt before. As the fleet overcame storm after storm, our heads remained high, hearts swelled with pride and our spirits felt at one with the gods. When you worked the tiller, there could be felt a certain aura in the air. The gods were watching over us and they wouldn't let us fall. On the brightest days at sea, we felt like rulers and lords of the sea; we were the masters and the sea, whether calm or raging, was our servant.

Finally, on a clear night without the persistent rain, there came our first sighting of land on the horizon. There was a stir of excitement below deck, the prospect of wealth and power had homed into view and we were ready.

At dawn the following day, the vanguard of our fleet steered us towards the land. The coast was bare; the treasure troves that once clustered the edges of the land were nowhere to be seen. Our fleet remained by the coast, working its way south, and ignoring the distant villages.

By nightfall we reached a passage inland, not a fjord like home, but an estuary guiding us north-west to our destination. I was working the tiller once again as our passage narrowed; the open sea was behind us and the land on either side began to close in on the fleet like the jaws of the great wolf, Fenrir, said by our legends to be imprisoned in Asgard. It

was a cold night, but mist and frost did not choke the land, although dew clung to the blades of grass. Not much further now.

When the estuary came to an end, the land on either side seemed even closer. I heard instructions from the tillers on the other ships to keep straight; we were entering a second inroad into this land, a large river continuing northwards. Every man and ship mattered now and there was no turning back.

By the next day the oarsmen received word that we were about to land. It was noon when the fleet anchored in the river and we were left to wade our way through the water to the banks. I was one of the last to leave the ship. I wiped my helm several times before delicately resting it on my head as if it were a crown. I then drew my sword from its sheath, the blade was still shining and clear, my reflection stared back at me; my own eyes betrayed fear. This was it.

We worked our way across the remainder of the river and ascended the banks. They were muddy and wet, unlike those back home, but unworthy adversaries for warriors such as we. While the men looked at the land with uncertainty, I noticed an oak tree like the one I had witnessed before boarding the ship back home. Again a pair of ravens sat on the highest branches, their eyes looked down on us all as if we were their prey. Only when we headed north did the ravens resume their flight. They too headed north and were following us.

Together we wandered this land where our ancestors had once ruled. Their rights had long since been taken and we were here to reclaim them. We were prepared for the inhabitants of this land; we had heard the tales of their traits, their evils and their nature. We knew that they would try to stop us as we headed north, but we had the gods on our side so how could we possibly fail?

We spent that day marching north, finding no one to oppose our advance. Perhaps they were now conceding to our rights, but none of us would believe that until we had recaptured our kingdom. It was on the

second day since our landing that we could see a great city but between us lay our enemy, a vast army they had gathered and they were ready for us.

Our army was commanded by several jarls and, when they caught sight of our enemy, they halted our march and began issuing commands. We lined up in formation and waited. I stood with those on the front line, our blades were held out in front of us and we began engraving runes into their surfaces. Some of us carved our own names others chose those of the gods, such as Odin, Thor, Freyja and Tyr. When we had finished we each kissed our amulets, holding them close to our chests, and awaited the call to advance.

We could see our enemy in the distance now. Those on steeds were wandering back and forth before the front line, shouting commands and gesturing with their unsheathed swords. No army seemed willing to make that final move, to bridge that last gap, to release that piercing call and charge the fields. Drums began to sound across the damp earth between us; the build up to the battle began here.

Boom, boom.

The jarls stood on the front line with us.

Boom, boom.

The horsemen in the distance retreated behind our enemy, their swords held aloft.

Boom, boom.

The leaders opposite pointed their swords towards us.

Boom, boom.

My people bowed their heads and shut their eyes pleading with the gods to watch over us, or grant our passage to Valhalla should we fall.

Boom, boom.

Our enemy began its advance towards us.

Boom, boom.

We went to meet them.

That day we fought as our gods have come to expect. Every one of our men hacked and slashed at his enemy, while the mud and water beneath his feet tried in vain to work against him. We threw down our enemy and they too diminished our numbers, but as the battle wore on it became clear that we were in the ascendancy.

At one point I had slain another of my enemy, his name was not important, but as I turned from his body to approach my next target, I noticed a small gathering in the distance. On the western side of the battlefield rose a large knoll overlooking the struggle. A group of horsemen were watching the progress of our conflict; their leader was a large silhouette against the dark skies, his steed had eight legs, and I could just make out a single red eye glowing like a ruby against the shadows of his sheltered face. On his shoulders were perched birds, but even from so far away I knew they were ravens. This was not a horseman, but Odin, the principal deity of my people and he had come to this land to watch over us, to bear witness to our victory.

On the battlefield the tide began to turn. Our men fought on with great valour, but soon our enemy began to outnumber us. Those that retreated were chased down by horsemen and at that moment I understood Odin's presence here. He was accompanied by a small group of armed riders that must have been the Valkyries and this battle was surely the end for us all. We would not be reclaiming the land of our fathers, we would not be gathering riches, our descendants would not get to hear of our bravery and endeavour, and we would not be going home.

At that moment some of my people looked to me and I knew we were all thinking the same thing. It's difficult to go on when you know that

in the end everything you have achieved will be forgotten. Heroes and victors are the ones that are remembered, it was true of our ancestors that had accomplished the unthinkable and still returned home to us. Never did we hear tales of our people that had shamefully fled from battle. That was not the kind of tradition we passed onto our children. We fought to the end, even if only one of us stood against an entire army; that is why we were greater than any that dared to defy us. So it was, on only my second day in this new land, I fought my first and last battle.

When the remainder of us fell we knew something our enemies did not, that life for us only just began after death. To this day, I cannot recall the feel of my adversary's blade as it drew the last breath from my lungs, but what I can remember is opening my eyes and finding the stars above looking back at me. It felt almost like a dream; my senses were numb, but my mind felt alive and at ease. In time I found I was not alone, there were voices coming from the cosmos and they were calling my name.

As I climbed to my feet, I found that I was surrounded by darkness, save for the stars that illuminated the sky above. Only the whispers of my name could break the stillness in the air and I waited to be set free, to be released from this enshrouding torment. In time I was borne away from this place, elevated to the stars, which glowed brighter as I approached, seemingly willing to embrace me.

When I reached Asgard I found myself in a throne room and looking down at me as I expected was Odin. Only words had enabled me to picture him before but now he sat before me, his expression revealed little; neither mirth nor sadness and as I rose to my feet he leaned back in anticipation. I could see the two ravens on his shoulders; they looked back at me with a knowing glance, as if my fate was already sealed and they wished to punish me with their eyes.

'You fought valiantly,' Odin said, 'but it is my judgement that determines your passage in the afterlife. Should you reside in Valhalla amongst the Einherjar or will I cast you into Niflheim where only cowards

dwell? Can you give me reason why Valhalla should open its doors to you?'

'For obeying all that I was taught,' I replied, 'I did not feign from my duty, nor did I give up when all hope had fled the battlefield.'

'Indeed, but you were not the victor either.'

'That may be true, but surely you honour those that prove their worth and fall gloriously in battle.'

'I have in the past, but most of my heroes are the ones whose death inspires the survivors to victory. Your death was insignificant to the outcome of the battle, your defeat was already inevitable, and yet your bravery and valour did not desert you until the last. For that you should be rewarded, am I right?'

'That is not for me to answer,' I said, 'all I can do is await your decision and graciously accept my fate.'

'Then so be it,' Odin replied. He spoke to each of the ravens on his shoulders and listened as they whispered their counsel.

As they mulled over my destiny, I thought of my family and of home. Perhaps I had not achieved all I had wished, but is that not the same for most of us? To fulfil every desire and ambition would have taken me several lifetimes and yet I found some consolation in the short life I had lived. Whatever my fate, I could rest easy knowing that I had served my people with honour and fealty and they could have expected no more.

My people reigned over the oceans, seas and rivers of the world, and as I look back on those days I feel gratitude to have been a part of it. To most we were pagans and marauders, but they were blinded by the truth of our existence. We conquered the seas, throwing down the gauntlet to Mother Nature's most powerful forces and we overcame the obstacles and hurdles every time. There would come a day when we were subdued forever, but until that bitter time we were the proudest people alive.

Odin now smiled and seemed much pleased, before turning to me.

‘The verdict has been reached,’ he said, then delivered his judgement.